

PRAYER: A BASIS FOR UNITY AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS

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This is not intended to be either a scholarly discussion of or a theological dissertation on prayer: its nature, purpose, forms *et cetera*. Besides, Islamic prayer is a subject about which I would in no way be competent to speak: one small reason being my total ignorance of Arabic. Furthermore, there are excellent books on the subject of prayer.

This is not intended to be a loud clarion call summoning Muslims to Sunday Mass and Christians to Friday Mosque service; it is clear, rather I hope it is clear to all of us leaders that we may not and should not take active part in the cultic worship of our brothers of another faith. No good would come from this. Eventually, we would both lose our faith and identity; and, the present problems between us would be multiplied and increased beyond our wildest imagination. About the only result we could be sure of from this type of "praying together" would be complete loss of respect for each other because the basis of respect is always founded on an individual living according to his principles, doing what he firmly believes, being indeed a man of his faith for all seasons.

Prayer, in its most profound sense, is a deep, personal act of man. It is a very special and very personal love relationship with God. It is man's way of responding to his duty to adore God. Yet, since no man is an island, man is made for community, is born into a particular community; he lives and dies in community. Prayer then is also a community act. Therefore, to enter fully into community, cultic worship means to join the community fully, wholeheartedly, without restrictions or reservations or limitations. It means conversion. For a Muslim thus to enter fully the community, cultic worship of Catholics, he would have to be

converted to Catholicism. And, for a Catholic to enter fully the community, cultic worship of Muslims, he would have to be converted to Islam. So what happens? We become like two men playing the tennis or ping pong. We "change sides". To carry this ridiculous situation to its ultimate logical conclusion: we would end up right back where we are now, trying to find some basis of/for unity and understanding between Muslims and Christians – between us!

So, joining in prayer in this sense does not produce unity or understanding but it merely confuses the problem. Along this line of thought, I also wish to add an important observation. I do not advocate joining in prayer together aimed at converting the other party through prayer meetings. If we do that we become like bandits, hiding under a false cloak of friendship and mutual trust, ready to rob one another of the very value which makes us what we are: Christians and Muslims. People are not united nor made more understandable through banditry!

My paper is nothing more than the sharing of some personal experiences, feelings, reflections and impressions in 15 years of close and happy association with many Muslims on the subject of prayer.

Most of my contact with Muslims has been in the barrios and sitios and in one Notre Dame Schools of South Cotabato: with the farmer struggling to make corn and rice grow in sandy land and with the Notre Dame student struggling to make wisdom grow out of his studies.

It is my hope and prayer, that in sharing some of these reflections with you, we may all be moved to become better men of prayer. As leaders, we cannot afford to forget we cannot force our people to pray, nor can impose prayer on them. People are led to prayer when they witness sincere men praying. Today, possibly, this is our greatest challenge: to lead our people to prayer by being men of prayer; to get our people to live lives of love by witnessing our love for one another.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me clarify briefly the meaning I am attaching to these words: "prayer: a basis for unity between Muslims and Christians". I am using these words as commonly used in daily conversation, not in any technical sense.

Prayer: I intend this word to express the fundamental concept of prayer: a man worshipping, honoring, praising God! Allah! Man answer-

ing God's call for adoration and love. It is used principally in the personal sense in contradistinction to the cultic, liturgical sense which is always a quasi-official or unofficial form of praying by people of a particular faith. Personally, I like the description of prayer by that holy Carmelite nun, Teresa of Avila, that runs thus: "a transport of the heart, a simple look towards heaven, a cry of gratitude and love (and worship) in the midst of sufferings or joys." We can say then that prayer is a friendly relationship of man with God. Prayer is man living a life of love for God and God's people. Teresa said it better: "Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God, frequently conversing in secret with Him, who, as we know, loves us." Whether servant, slave or son, any man is capable, with the help of God, of being in terms of friendship with Him.

Basis: by this I mean the foundation of something. I build a house on a "basis", a foundation. The bases for unity and understanding between Muslims and Christians will be those areas, primarily, in which we are in full agreement and anxious to cooperate with each other either in the hard task of constructing better interpersonal relationships or eradicating the horrible mistakes of the past — and the present.

Unity: this word is not to imply "religious uniformity", i.e., that we all become one in beliefs, religious acts, etc. Unity does not sameness. Nor, does being exactly alike, uniform, give rise to "unity".

I am using the word "unity" as Fr. Vitaliano Gorospe, S.J., uses it in his book, *The New Christian Morality and the Filipino*: "Just as national unity can only be achieved through cultural diversity, so, too, spiritual unity is possible not through religious uniformity but amidst religious diversity. The problem of integration. . will remain unsolved as long as Filipino Christians think in terms of 'christianization' rather than 'unification' through religious pluralism". By unity then I mean we preserve our different religious beliefs and unite in mutual respect and tolerance and even encouragement.

Understanding: I use this word as it is used in daily conversation. If I understand something, I know it. Furthermore, "understanding" frequently implies sympathy, patience and empathy. The "understanding" teacher is the kind we remember the best because that teacher "understood" us, knew us and our problems and was patiently kind

when we failed. Yet that teacher could be firm and would not hesitate to punish us if we deserved it. We appreciated that teacher's concern for us. This is what I mean when I say prayer is a basis for understanding between us. It helps us know each other better, enables us to be filled with sympathy, patience and empathy for each other.

I defined these words because they are used to spell out this seminar's theme. Just as it is possible for all of us to hold, use, a tennis racket in a different way, so also is it possible for us to use these words in a different way because, naturally, we think differently. Take marriage. How many married couples think differently? And, how often has their different thinking led to a different use of words which finally concluded in a beautiful misunderstanding? But the effort the couples put into solving these differences, into being reconciled, led to a deeper, more profound love of one another. When I was invited to this seminar, it took me some time to choose a topic. As I considered possible topics, it dawned to me that what most impressed and inspired me about, attracted my admiration and love for Muslims has been their spirit of prayer. A Muslim of prayer is indeed an inspiring person, a beautiful person. This spirit of prayer I have met in so many Muslims has not grown dim in these hours of suffering, bleeding and dying. For some reason, prayer seems to grow stronger and more genuine when nourished in suffering.

When I first went to Sto. Niño Parish, South Cotabato, in December, 1964, there was an old Muslim named Cunto. He came daily to the marketplace to sell firewood. On the frequent occasions I met him walking, bent beneath a heavy load of wood which he had been carrying six or seven kilometers through the mountains, he was always cheerful and friendly. He was terribly poor, dressed in dirty rags; but, the smile on his face was pure gold. On Fridays he prayed at the mosque of Datu Kapok Ambalagan. And if you saw his face then, you would have seen a gentle, kindly face, the face of a praying man. Everytime I saw him I could not help but think of Christ, crowned with thorns, carrying his cross. I knew then where he got the strength not only to carry a heavy load of wood but to carry on life so richly amid such terrible poverty. Cunto's strength came from his prayer.

In January 1972, Muslims fled their sitio in Banga, South Cotabato when it was hit by bad elements late at night. Datu Padasan, a blind old man, was left hidden by his family in an open-pit toilet. Two days later when the old man's family returned, it heard him loudly chanting Arabic prayers. Later that week, I asked the old man how he managed to stay alive under those horrible conditions. He answered: "I prayed to Allah. I knew Allah would not let me die!" Old, praying, blind Padasan had better insight into human values than the bad elements who had set the sights of their guns on people. Padasan's strength came from his prayer.

Recently on a beach in Mindanao stood a group of Muslims. A young Muslim name Osmenia told a Christian, as they were about to depart from each other: "Pray for me, I am going to die." Osmenia's strength as he went to meet death came from his prayer.

I am not giving these examples to imply that there are no similar examples among Christians. I merely am giving examples of praying Muslims who have greatly impressed me. Surely these were men of prayer, men, as Thomas Merton notes, who are close to God, His faithful and loyal servants. True Muslims.

What impresses a person, always influences his way of thinking and acting. This is a basic principle of advertising and communication. If we are impressed by something or someone, then we think and act accordingly. I know in my own life as a Catholic priest that on the occasions I was impressed by Muslims of prayer, I took a second look at my own prayer life, and finding myself wanting, tried to do better.

The successful, admired man of today is the Violent Man. He wields power, gets things done, gets what he wants. One of the saddest commentaries about our era is that the Violent Man has become the modern hero, the TV attraction, the theme for practically every movie. In spite of the fact that he leaves a trail of broken, twisted human bodies, he is the model for modern man. This image of a colossal Violent Man smashing human lives must be replaced by the reality of the Praying Man whose own body is bent low in worship and who stoops to uplift his brother. Only the Praying Man can restore the human being to humanity. Not until this restoration takes place will there be human growth, development, justice — peace!

Prayer makes us “lovers” not only of God but of each other. Prayer is the only sure means man has at his disposal to insure the preservation of humanity now confronted by violence. Prayer makes a man think, concentrate, acknowledge his sins, listen, sacrifice — prayer in other words makes a man do exactly what he needs to do to become fully alive. The more we adore God, worship Him, love Him, the more we draw near Him, the more human we become. Prayer is something only the *brave* man can do. And we all admire the Brave Man. Through the light of prayer a man is enabled to see himself as God sees him, with his blemishes, weaknesses, sins, stupidities. It takes a brave man to look himself squarely in the soul.

Prayer is a necessity. Man must worship God. Only by fulfilling this obligation can he ever expect to become all that God expects of him. Prayer alone can bring us together, unite us in the exercise of justice; and, without complete justice there never will be a moment's peace.

But here in the Philippines, what can we do about establishing prayer as a basis for unity and understanding between us?

Prayer is essentially man's reciprocating God's love: our telling God, through word and act, that we love and adore Him. Therefore, prayer has to be looked at in somewhat the same fashion we view the love of two people. A loving husband and wife do not sit around the sala ever so politely discussing the psychological and theological definitions of love. If they do that, they would be making marital history! Your little child, climbing on your knee, does not cuddle up to you and whisper in your ear: Amon, I'm going to explain in detail the meaning of my love for you. No! She throws her arms around your neck and squeezes love into you.

Love can be killed by too many words. Love is shown by living it. You know when someone loves you. You do not have to ask — and you certainly do not ask for a definition. Since prayer is also living a life of love, prayer too can be killed by too many words, too much talk about it. Prayer must be lived. When we sit around discussing it technically, prayer becomes little more than a lab specimen to be shelved once we go onto another topic. Prayer is something we should stop talking about, and start doing — living. We can start right now, this moment, in this room, as I am talking, in the depths of your heart. Just as there

are those tender moments when a husband and wife must be alone to express their love for one another, so too we must take time out, to be alone with God, to express our adoration and love for him – and to ask His forgiveness for our sins. These most sacred moments are the strongest basis for our unity and understanding because when we pray in this manner we become one in thought, attitude and intention as we honor the One True God, of whom there is no other. We all, both Muslims and Christians, become the objects of God's love. For while the world admires the Violent Man, God loves the Praying Man.

A man is always willing to help a friend, a loved one. Here is another type of unity and understanding which comes about from prayer, if we would only start praying for each other. We must start to pray for each other, publicly in the Church and Mosque. But far more important, the praying must fill the chambers of our hearts. How many Christians have prayed for the welfare of Muslims and vice-versa? And when was the last time? In a conversation I had last November with Dr. Mohammed Abraham, the Egyptian *imam* of the Manila Mosque, he commented: "basically the conflict in Mindanao is spiritual. And it will not be solved until men on both sides begin to live their religions faithfully and pray regularly." I believe firmly enmities between us will never be removed until we sincerely pray for one another. Only through prayer can we be united and made acceptable to each other. Like a hideous monster, hatred has risen its ugly head between us; and, it searches us out, like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us. Prayer is the weapon God has placed at our disposal to destroy this beast.

There are two types of love which placed extraordinary demands on a man. These demands are so far above the ordinary human heart's capacity that it is impossible for a man to attain the heights of either of these loves without special help from God. One type demands that a man lay down his life willingly for his fellow man; and, the other type demands that a man love his enemy! Of these types, I believe the second is the most difficult to practice. To pray for and to love someone who hates you, who has stolen your land and burned your home and killed a loved one, impossible! However, sometimes, God expects and demands the impossible by giving us the means to accomplish it. If a man prays regularly and humbly, God will give him the strength to do

the impossible: to pray for and to love his enemy. I have met several Christians who are praying for Muslims. What greater unity and understanding than this?

Once we start praying for each other, then we start thinking about each other. At first, these thoughts might be "hard", but prayer will soften them, eventually into a genuine concern for one another. Then we will begin to see each other more and more in God's design. Prayer, which forces us to listen to God's commands, will eventually force us to listen keenly to the cries and needs of those who are suffering among us.

We are all yearning for peace. But peace is something more than a cease-fire, or the cessation of shooting, burning and killing. The fact that two people have stopped throwing stones at each other does not mean necessarily they have stopped hating each other, and have begun to love. There can be no peace without justice. There can be no justice until each person respects the rights of others. This is impossible, until a man sees his brother through eyes bathed in prayer. Prayer alone permits a man to see his brother clearly and respect his rights. Prayer alone gives a man the vision to claim the great heights of development wherein he may attain the divine and human dream of peace.

Another very practical way we can employ prayer as a basis between us is through the practice of "spontaneous prayer: *prayer which rises naturally between two friends*, like water bubbling from a mountain spring, fresh and clear invigorating. To be effective, this prayer must be truly "spontaneous"; it must not be forced or prepared for through practice sessions. It comes naturally. Sometimes I have had the joy of this experience in barrio Upper Sepaka, South Cotabato, where the Passionist Fathers are serving the people of Datu Kapok Ambalagan. It is a small place, nestling in the folds of the mountains. The people are all Muslims, hard working, peace-loving, struggling for existence. Sometimes, at night, some men and I would sit around the Notre Dame of Upper Sepaka Elementary School. Suddenly, we would find ourselves praying out loud together – asking God to protect us, give us food, accept our praise. These beautiful moments of intimacy with God and His people usually ended when a young man named Dausay would sing his Koranic prayers. His voice would echo off the

mountains and then go darting through the night air, making us all more aware of our complete and absolute dependence on God. Somehow, the stars seemed to twinkle brighter. No one went to sleep afraid.

Sometime, when you are alone with a close friend or a kin, try spontaneous prayer. As the saying goes: try it, try will like it. the sense of unity and understanding you will experience stems from your closeness to God.

Still, another way is devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Sadly, this is a bond we overlook. Several years ago Bishop Fulton Sheen, in a televised talk in New York City, remarked that the great link between Muslims and Christians throughout the world is their devotion to Mary. He speculated that in the distant future, this devotion to Mary would become the bridge over which we would cross to be joined together in respect and love.

Gino Cerbella in his article titled "Muslims Join Christians in Honoring Virgin Mary" said:

The devotion with which Muslims pray to Mary is positive important and noble. It could serve as one of the surest ways towards the desired 'dialogue' between adherents of the two great monotheistic religions: Islamism and Christianity.

Underlying Muslim devotion to Mary is the "divine" word contained in the Koran. This sacred scripture dedicates one of its most interesting and respectful chapters to the Mother of Jesus and to Christianity. Sutra 19, entitled 'Mary's Sutra', contains a description of the miraculous virgin birth. In verse 16, Mohammed records God's words to him: 'Remember Mary too in the Book when she left her family and headed eastward. She took a veil to shroud herself: and I sent my spirit (Gabriel) who appeared in human form to her. She said to him: 'My refuge from you is in the Merciful One: if you fear him, leave me alone.' Gabriel replied: 'I am the messenger of your Lord, commissioned to give you a pure son.' Mary answered: 'How can I possibly have a child if no man has touched me and I upright?' Gabriel replied: 'So it will be. Your Lord has spoken.'

Cerbella recalled that Archbishop Antonio Khoreike of Saida, Lebanon, wrote about a Marian pilgrimage in 1954 during which "The image of Mary went from town to town and in mixed areas Muslims took part in the procession along-side the Christians. They erected triumphal arches in honor of Mary, on which there were inscribed verses

of the Koran or traditional sayings that referred to Mary." There was a similar occurrence a few years ago when the late Bishop McSorley, O.M.I., held a procession honoring Mary under the title of Our Lady of Fatima through the streets of Jolo.

Cerbella continues: "Finally, I think of Iraq and a great procession in honor of the Blessed Sacrament some years ago. A huge throng of Muslims took part, walking through the streets lined with banners, carpets and palms. And the Muslims shouted: 'Long live our Christian brothers; health and blessings to Jesus, the great prophet! Hail to Mary, the Mother of Jesus! May Allah preserve her for the welfare of our children.'"

As we gather before Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, we stand together, united in our devotion and love for her. She, I am sure, will share with us her understanding of us. Before her we are like children. At present, some of us are acting like spoiled children, arguing and fighting. Mary can teach us, through her motherly love, how to play together again.

Finally, I would suggest, according to the proper norms, more ecumenical prayer meetings. Not only would the prayers unite us, but we would be standing together. What better witness can we give our peoples than the image of men standing side by side in prayer? This is something anyone can understand without any explanation.

What would be wonderful, though, would be to have such ecumenical prayer meeting in the barrios and sitios, between our peoples who are feeling the hurt. Prayer would then serve as a medicine for healing the wounds we have inflicted on one another, wounds which will last for generations, like bloody mouths screaming for revenge, unless we, standing united and understanding in and through prayer, allow God the opportunity to heal us.

To help hasten this healing process, I request you to join your hearts with mine in prayer, which I have culled from a prayer written by a Muslim, Dr. Alunan C. Glang, and another prayer, by a Christian, St. Francis of Assisi:

Our Lord!

Open our hearts to one another and to one another's interests and concerns. Bring us out of the darkness of suspicion into the light of understanding and dialogue; make us shun evils both manifest and

secret; and guide us to friendship and peace. [By Dr. A. C. Glang]

Lord, make me an instrument of your Peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow Love,

Where there is injury, pardon,

Where there is doubt, faith,

Where there is despair, hope,

Where there is darkness, Light,

Where there is sadness, joy. [by St. Francis of Assisi]

Rabbanaa aa-tena fid dunyaa hasanatan wa fil aakhe-rate hasanatan wa gena 'azaaban naar' (Our Lord, Grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter and save the Filipino people from difficulties. Amen.)

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